

## “Passenger Trains and Other Forbidden Loves”

From the unpublished collection of personal stories, **Growing Up Queer, Fundamentalist, White and Drunk in Jim Crow Mississippi or, God What Were You Thinking?**

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It was on one early fall afternoon in 1955 when I first discovered that love was suspect.

I was five-years old and standing on the front porch with Welber Neil, my best friend. Correction, Welber used to be my best friend until he started school. He was a year older and First Grade had already turned him into what my daddy would call a real smart-mouth. Daddy said too much education was likely to turn even the most Christian people into smart-mouths.

On that day, I remember Welber proclaiming, “*Real boys don’t kiss their daddies.*”

I didn’t believe him at first.

“Yeah, they do!” I blurted, not even knowing what this thing called a “Real Boy” was supposed to be, but I remember thinking, “Why would any kind of boy, real or not, refuse to kiss his daddy?” That sounded too mean to be true. Of all the baloney Welber Neil had toted home from school so far, this had to be the most outrageous.

I scoured his face to see if he was fooling. Welber had bright red hair, freckles and a set of teeth gapped like a hard-played piano. He appeared sincere enough, smiling like he did, his cheeks plumped up like two freckled eggs, but Welber was bad to tell a lie. And because he disappeared into that mysterious building called

“School” each morning, everything he said now rang with the assurance of age and experience.

I missed the old, uneducated Welber. Before school started, he and I were forever in his yard or mine, inventing some elaborate game of pretend. We played hard, whether cowboys or army or pirates. Our britches constantly sagged, their pockets heavy with rocks and marbles and chinaberries passing for silver bullets, hand grenades, or looted plunder.

There were only two powers potent enough to jolt us from our imaginary world. One was the call from our mothers for supper and the other was the train whistle from the Sandersville Station. The moment we heard that shrill beacon, we dropped whatever pretend game we were playing and took off, our pockets full of treasure. We ran like rabbits, ducking under the barbed wire fence behind our houses, flying across the pasture, dodging cow pies and jumping red ant beds, racing each other to the tracks.

Now personally, I always hoped it would be a passenger train. I loved to watch people’s faces in the windows as they flew by going to someplace so wondrous I couldn’t even imagine it. The rocks in my pocket magically turned into travel fare.

But no matter how I tried to convince Welber about the superiority of passenger trains he stayed faithful to the rusty, rattling freight trains. He emptied HIS pockets pitching rocks into the open boxcars.

I couldn't understand it. The best you might do with a freight train was catch sight of a few dazed-looking cows or maybe a raggedy hobo or two. But mostly it was one boring boxcar after the other.

After Welber started to school the fun came to a halt. He began to act like he was an authority on everything under the sun and I was his ignorant pupil. He would sit me down on a porch step and make me say the alphabet or count to a hundred while he stood over me with a fly swatter, ready to slap my bare arm if I stumbled.

Besides his ABC's, Welber had been learning other things at schools. In particular, he was passionate about this subject he called "Real Boys."

I wasn't buying into it, especially the part about boys not kissing their daddies. Welber didn't let it go at that.

"That aint' all," he said, obviously ready to unload another whopper. "Real boys don't beg to sit in the their daddy's lap neither."

How did he know? Daddy and I always sat in his recliner when we watched the Friday Night Fights. Had Welber been sneaking around after dark, peaking in our window?

Now I was worried. "What else is it Real Boys do?"

Welber went on to tell me Real Boys carried their schoolbooks with their arms straight down by their sides and girls carried theirs over their chest, elbows bent.

And he said Real Boys walked with their palms turned toward the front and girls with their palms pointed back.

He made me walk around on the porch like this for quite a while, and even though it felt really stupid, I didn't argue. It helped to think of acting like a Real Boy as just another game of pretend.

While I was parading around with my hands in the Real Boy position, from off in the distance, the whistle arose. Welber was first to jump down from the porch and take off toward the pasture, but I began to catch up fast, especially after I saw that the palms-toward-the-front rule didn't apply to running.

We made it to the tracks at about the same time, just as the monstrous black engine emerged from behind the screen of pines.

"It's a people train!" I yelled, delighted.

It was almost upon us now, building up speed as it charged down the track on its way to who knows where. The roar was deafening.

So I wasn't sure I heard Welber right when he cupped his hand to my ear and yelled, "*Real* boys don't look at passenger trains."

I turned to him in disbelief. He wasn't smiling.

"Only girls do *that*," he shouted. Then he dropped his eyes to the ground, showing me how Real Boys avoided such temptation.

I reluctantly did as he demonstrated, trying to rein in my gaze. But the urge to look was too strong. Just once, I bargained with myself. Only the tiniest of peeks.

When I looked, it was all over. I was once again mesmerized by the wondrous sight. The cars, graceful and sleek, donned in their silver jackets, were passing with a silken speed. Windows framed the faces of well-dressed strangers, all going to some place better than they had left.

My breathing seized up and my heart beat fast to the pounding music of iron and steel.

For the briefest of moments, it was if the train beckoned for me to join those lucky travelers on a journey far beyond anything that I had ever dreamed, yet a place I was destined to know. All I had to do was step aboard.

After the last car had streamed off into the distance, drawing the magic with it, a hard shove brought me to my senses.

“You looked!” Welber yelled. “You ain’t no Real Boy. Prob’ly never will be.”

I glanced at Weber’s disgusted expression and then gazed off in the direction of the disappearing train.

Welber was right. I had failed his stupid test. But in that moment it didn’t matter. I knew in my heart I would never be able to give up on passenger trains for good. Not if I lived forever.

I figured being a Real Boy might require doing certain things that didn’t come natural, like carrying my books by my side or even using a satchel. I’d learn to walking stiffly and throw a ball, and to not giggle too loudly nor cry at all. I was good at pretending. I could do that if I had to.

But what about the other things, the important ones, the ones that come barreling down the tracks on fiery wheels and can sweep you up with trembling delight? The ones that didn’t even have names, yet made you hold your breath and cause your heart to leap like Christmas?

Those forbidden loves I would not give up so easily. I would hold them close. I would hide them in a secret place the Welbers of the world couldn’t find.

I would keep them safe—tucked away in the deepest pockets of the soul.